Early English language learning in East Asia

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Introduction

In East Asia, education currently combines widespread features of innovation, development and social change alongside stable pedagogic practices, including the maintenance of long-standing features of heritage and traditional cultures of learning. This combination, with productive and uneasy tensions, can be seen in the enthusiasm for English language learning (ELL), including English for young learners (EYL). The East Asia region in this study includes China, Japan, South Korea, Mongolia, Hong Kong and Taiwan. For most children in the region, English is a foreign language since most young learners will have few opportunities to use English for out-of-class communication, but forms of bilingual education are emerging in places where English is a medium of instruction. The popular urge to learn English has elements of fashion – often labelled ‘a craze’, ‘frenzy’, ‘fever’ or ‘obsession’ – particularly in China and Korea (Hu 2009; Butler 2015). It includes strong perceptions that English is useful, especially for younger learners, and it reflects the popular belief that it is better to start early (see Singleton and Pfenniger, this volume).

Somewhat polarised features are visible in the rapidly expanding sector of EYL (which here refers to kindergarten and primary age learners, aged 3–12). One development is the move away from practices of memorizing vocabulary and grammar towards learning in more communicative approaches: children learn English for fun and through play, but they are also encouraged to use the language to discuss and solve problems and thus develop foundations of critical and creative thinking. Interactive and learner-centred learning have been much promoted: Hong Kong, Korea and Japan have a record of emphasising task-based approaches (see, e.g., Carless 2003, 2004) and more recently this has become current in China, and this often melds with communicative and activity-based orientations, including in Taiwan and Mongolia. However, to outsiders, many observed teaching and learning methods seem stable but static, often as largely teacher-centred or directed whole-class activities. These may reflect more traditional cultures of learning, in what are often – sometimes misleadingly – labelled as ‘Confucian heritage cultures’ but which do reflect sociocultural beliefs about learning (Li 2012; Chan and Rao 2009; Jin and Cortazzi 1998, 2004, 2006; Cortazzi and Jin 2013). Such beliefs, together with institutional constraints,
mediate such policy innovations as task-based learning in Chinese primary schools and may weaken them (Zhang and Adamson 2007).

This chapter concerns East Asian contexts, but we give particular attention to China because the Chinese education system has by far the greatest number of participants involved in English learning and includes the world’s largest group of young learners (Pan 2015; Morgan et al. 2017). It seems likely that through Chinese economic and social influence, developments in Chinese EYL will be influential throughout this region. We sketch features of the general education context and indicate common EYL pedagogic practices through a discussion of critical issues. We highlight influences of parents and likely roles of digital technology, and briefly discuss English as a medium of instruction and needs for research.

**Historical perspectives and the educational context**

Each country within this region has different historical perspectives. China and Mongolia both had a post-1950s educational and linguistic tradition which emphasised Russian. In Mongolia, since the turn of the century, there has been a swing towards English, whereas a swing was evident more than 20 years earlier in China. In Mongolia, introducing English has recently moved from secondary to primary education, and the expansion of EYL, even more than elsewhere, has been constrained by teachers’ limited knowledge and training, school resources and the demography of a scattered population with traditional nomadic lifestyle, often living in remote areas (Cohen 2004). Arguably, Japan and Korea have had traditions of over fifty years of widespread ELL in schools but only extended this to EYL in the 2000s.

In Chinese education, English has had an ambiguous role in a chequered history: since 1949 the language found or lost favour periodically within social movements (Adamson 2004). Even in Hong Kong with its own long-time external contact with and internal use of English, there have been attitudinal swings towards English, which have limited the provision of English-medium primary schools. Putonghua (Mandarin) has rapidly expanded alongside the native Cantonese language in a system of ‘one country, two systems and three languages’. In China, the current popularity for learning English continues apace with China’s increasing international role; the expansion of Chinese business, commerce and tourism; students aiming for international study; and popular perceptions of the utility of English.

In East Asia institutionalised exams have long dominated the focus of school learning (Carless 2011; Butler 2015). The gatekeeping effect of university entrance exams affects perceptions of English at school levels; a washback affects tests to enter the best secondary schools and, successively, tests to enter prestigious primary schools. This exam-orientation affects EYL as a feature of East Asian education, and although China, Japan and South Korea are modifying such exams and broadening school curricula, an exam-oriented mindset remains a significant influence for EYL (Zhang and Wang 2011). Other traditional regional influences include large classes, more teacher-centred approaches and caution towards more interactive teaching, but more learner-centred pedagogies which many teachers desire are constrained by institutional and parental influences (Cortazzi and Jin 2001; Li 2012).

Historically, EYL remains an innovation in much of East Asia. Official starting ages in schools are around the age of eight or nine. In China children should start learning English at Grade 1 or 3 of primary schools (age 7 or 9). However, with the widespread and ever-increasing parental demand for English, some kindergartens start classes before that, particularly in urban areas. A common belief holds that an earlier start is beneficial. In Korea, children start at Grade 3 (age 9); in Japan, children start in Grades 5 or 6 (ages 11–12), but
again many start earlier. In Hong Kong, with a stronger ELL legacy from the colonial era up to 1997, English is introduced in kindergarten (age 3) and is established from primary Grade 1. In many East Asian cities, the age of beginning EYL is cascading downwards. In an accelerating urban trend, English is introduced not only in the lower primary grades but also at pre-school stages in kindergartens (ages 3–6). However, this waterfall effect has been slow to reach more outlying or rural areas, most notably in Mongolia, yet a similar pattern is observable in Japan and Korea.

A historical issue unique to China was the ‘one child’ policy from 1979, which was modified in 2016 to allow parents to have a second child. A surge in birth rates showed couples wanted a sibling for their only child. Predictably, this will affect the availability of places in child-care centres, kindergartens and primary schools, and underline current shortages of trained teachers, including EYL teachers. The previous policy affected child-rearing and educational attitudes as parents and grandparents strove to put maximum investment into the envisaged future for a single child in the family; for many this included EYL.

Significant challenges for EYL can be highlighted within the wider ELL background in China (Cortazzi and Jin 1996a, 1996b; Jin and Cortazzi 2004) and research which focuses on Chinese learners (Jin and Cortazzi 2006, 2011, 2012), but challenges also need to be seen in the context of early childhood education and positive EYL practices. ELL has been influenced by successful reforms and continuing progress of the Chinese economy and society. Kindergarten and primary stages are widely recognised as fundamental to further learning, and therefore curricula and pedagogic models are changing, including philosophies and pedagogic programmes adapted from the West, such as Maria Montessori and Reggio Emilia programmes, perspectives derived from John Dewey or project- and task-based learning (Lau 2012).

Situational features affecting EYL in China include continuing education reform to consolidate the start of English teaching, coupled with the ever-increasing public demand for English, allied with the belief held by many teachers, but particularly parents: the ‘earlier the better’ (Hu 2007, 2009). ELL implementation at primary stages, however, has been variable; this is unsurprising considering the vast Chinese geography, the huge number of children, the difficulties of providing educational resources in some areas and the availability of teachers. Some of these features apply widely in Japan and Korea, too (Hu and McKay 2012). The social and parental drive towards ELL is pushing down the starting ages in many places to beginning primary stages, then down to many kindergartens and even in nurseries and child-care centres when teachers are available. English is not, in fact, an official kindergarten curriculum subject in China, Japan or Korea, though ‘first rank’ kindergartens have initiated ELL.

Critical issues

Identifiable critical issues include early childhood demographic features; private sector ELL provision and business issues; educational values and parental attitudes; and teacher training and development. Other issues, such as resources, materials and methods or sustaining long-term learning and evaluating progress towards more proficient levels and broader educational and cultural development, are implicated within these.

Demographic issues

In China, significant demographic features of the early childhood education context impact ELL. The nearly 1.4 billion population and the geographic size of China has led to the world’s
largest centralised school system but with some regional and local diversity. The number of young learners who had entered Chinese kindergartens by 2016 reached over 44 million, which is an increase of 2.4% from 2015. Over 90 million children entered primary schools in 2016 (Ministry of Education 2016). These figures exclude children in the private sector of kindergartens and primary schools. Some estimates state that 67.2% of Chinese children before the age of five have started learning English (NA 2016). This is surely an overestimate nationally, but evidence of the early start can clearly be seen in metropolitan and larger cities.

Large-scale rapid educational development in cities has left a challenge of developing some aspects of EYL teaching and learning (Zhao and Hu 2008). This issue is also evident in Japan, Korea and Taiwan, but is highlighted in China by the sheer numbers and the social issue of some children’s differing backgrounds, with large-scale migration from countryside to metropolitan areas. Millions of migrant children from countryside areas now residing in cities have different educational backgrounds and linguistic experiences from their urban-born peers, which affects early schooling, home-school links and EYL. Conversely there is a ‘left behind’ generation of young children cared for by grandparents who remain in rural or outlying areas while the children’s parents work in cities, often so far away that visits to children can be rare.

The private sector

In increasingly competitive East Asian societies, the private sector for EYL is expanding as newly prosperous families strongly support their child’s education and see the value of ELL. In addition to normal school classes for English, with their limited curriculum hours, many children also go to private ‘training schools’ for English (sometimes known as ‘after-class’ or ‘cram’ classes). Around 20,000 such schools are registered in China (Ministry of Education 2016). The common use of the term ‘training’ is indicative: this is language training often with little emphasis on education, whereas early years’ specialists stress links of language development and EYL with overall child development and broader educational values. In some training schools, carers and parents are often nearby during classes and some observe from the back of the class. This helps parents to support children’s learning at home or to learn English themselves. Commonly, young urban learners have private home tutors and attend summer school programmes, perhaps in target language countries. These features are also common in Japan, Korea and Taiwan.

Often in this region the provision of early EYL classes has become a marketing feature for an institution for both educational and commercial values: within the private business sector, EYL is seen as a lucrative investment opportunity. Children’s attendance is a source of perceived social status for families whose child is learning English. This is particularly the case if teachers are ‘native speakers’ or ‘westerners’. The underlying pressures are influenced by parental perceptions that education is an investment in children’s futures: it is widely understood that learning English early is helpful to gain children’s entry into good secondary schools, and thence into good universities. EYL is seen to have a long-term value for personal advancement, future employment, socioeconomic achievement and internationalised futures. Apparently, fewer parents and learners understand how EYL is valuable for cognitive, social and cultural reasons that go beyond such utilitarian outcomes.

Cultural values

The high value put on East Asian children’s education has been a major factor in increasing numbers of private and pre-school education, including ELL. It accrues social status
to declare that one’s child is learning English before the nationally specified age. Early East Asian education in general has three strands: traditional culture (recently made more explicit in the case of ‘Confucian kindergartens’); modern local culture expressing some traditional values; and Western culture (Zhu and Zhang 2008).

Significantly, the expansion of EYL is predicted to increase further but is mediated by parental and social values. China has put more investment into basic education so that kindergartens and primary schools are better resourced. Also, Chinese parents are increasingly willing to invest heavily in the early years’ education of their children. This reflects a traditional East Asian value for education, for which parents sacrifice, but it is combined with a keen sense of competitiveness. Given such values, providing high quality schools and qualified teachers will remain a demanding issue for society, in state or private institutions. Local diversity can affect the implementation of the national policy of the EYL starting age. Variation in provision is due to a number of factors: geographical location, school size, available funding and resources, and especially the availability of appropriate teachers (Cohen 2004; Hu 2007). Within such expansion with huge numbers of learners involved in sometimes quite diverse contexts there is inevitably an issue of quality control regarding pedagogic practices, appropriate teaching staff, resources and materials (see ‘culture in classroom practices’ below).

Teachers, teacher training and development

A challenge throughout East Asia is the inadequacy of English skills, specific pedagogic training and development of EYL teachers (see Garton, et.al. 2011). In Korea and Hong Kong, teacher tests of English proficiency skills have been used to try to ensure teachers have appropriate skill levels: the effect of this as a policy depends on the precise nature of such tests, teachers’ attitudes towards them (often these are negative), and provision of appropriate programmes to enable teachers to meet relevant standards.

Kindergarten and primary teachers are often trained as generalist teachers and in Korea and Japan may teach multiple subjects besides English (Butler 2015); this is less likely in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. While many are graduates – some with master’s degrees – many still have relatively little training to teach English. In China, in 2007 there were not enough primary teachers of English to cover needed classes; many had no more than a two-year college training course (Liu 2007); even now, some barely have basic language proficiency. Many EYL teachers in Korea, Japan and Taiwan are aware that their own current levels of English do not meet minimum levels despite in-service courses and this impacts their confidence and pedagogic skills and affects learners’ motivation (Butler 2004; Hayes 2014). Employing ‘native’ English speakers is widespread in East Asia, but some are unqualified or without previous EYL experience. Their effectiveness depends partly upon how policies specify their expected roles and how they should help EYL and the education system (Butler 2015).

The Japanese practice of employing English-speaking teaching assistants to co-teach alongside primary teachers clearly has benefits of bringing different role models and cultural experiences to classrooms, but in itself this is unlikely to resolve the issue of enhancing local teacher training and skills, particularly if assistants are unqualified (Zhou and Ng 2016). Learners may rely on the Japanese teacher to translate major elements of lessons into Japanese; arguably, this weakens the effectiveness of language classes. In Korea, Taiwan and China, some teachers employed for their English language skills (including local graduates, some international graduates or undergraduate students of English) are not
professionally trained. The present regional shortage of English teachers for younger learners partly stems from relatively small numbers of specifically qualified teachers emerging from national training colleges and universities. Within the Chinese training curriculum for English teachers, courses tend to be general, with an emphasis on language knowledge and theory. They may not specifically equip students for competent English language teaching, and when courses do so, they rarely specifically train teachers for the EYL age group. Thus, in many East Asian contexts, EYL teachers may be trained to teach younger learners, but not specifically trained to teach English; others with good English language qualifications may lack specific training related to younger learners. An underlying public perception which adds to this problem is the popular myth that EYL involves simple language and therefore does not need special skills or advanced knowledge of pedagogy.

Fortunately, some teachers obtain recognised teaching qualifications through studying abroad, but for most this is not feasible. While the Chinese education system has strengths in ELL teacher development activities and training courses, including online programmes, these remain less developed for EYL. Many current EYL teachers want to earn specific qualifications, yet they cannot easily find good programmes to get appropriate comprehensive skills training. In addition, state universities in China have yet to establish advanced TEYL courses at the master’s level. This is a general issue in the East Asian region. Some local training is available via modelling, in which experienced English teachers give carefully planned demonstration lessons, watched by groups of teachers (Cortazzi and Jin 2001). This performance can be inspiring, insightful and suggestive for an audience but would not be considered training as such in ‘Western’ contexts. Overall, training EYL teachers seems likely to remain a problem in East Asia (Hayes 2014; Butler 2015). The lack of English teacher trainers who specialise in EYL constrains the establishment of high quality programs.

Current contributions

Digital technologies

It is clear that primary education and ELL in East Asia have developed and changed dramatically in some ways (Tobin et al. 2009). This is evident in the use of interactive whiteboards, digital media resources for stories, visuals, games and language activities. For individual learners – possibly at home with parents – there are burgeoning uses of ELL applications on handheld devices, besides online lessons with a remote English ‘tutor’, who is as likely an unqualified student as an experienced teacher.

In China, Japan and Korea (but much less in Mongolia because of resource availability), teachers are encouraged to use ICT for ELL in primary classes; this appears to be especially helpful for teachers to prepare resources for classes, especially for reading and vocabulary activities (Samad et al. 2013), but increasingly teachers use interactive whiteboards in class and access websites for stories and thematic vocabulary materials. In the rapidly developing private sector which drives China’s digital economy, new developments in online education, mobile phone and tablet applications (apps) are becoming popular for learning English. For EYL this includes the expanding area of one-on-one online tutoring (Li 2018). Frequently this focuses on reading and vocabulary, but sometimes on speaking in which one teacher works online with a single student (Liang and Yan 2014; Zhang 2017). Some apps have been specifically designed for young learners aged 3–8 in China, for use alongside their parents; these may use brief animated episodes and feature teachers and children engaging in contextualised
oral practice activities to teach words and phrases (de Groat 2015). Other apps intended for nine- to 12-year-olds may involve reading, pronunciation and vocabulary activities. Given the widely recognised Chinese digital innovations associated with mobile phones, the current government support for artificial intelligence developments and the considerable commercial and educational opportunities in such a huge educational system, ICT will develop rapidly in Chinese schools. This can be expected to affect EYL. Thus, ELL classes in some Chinese middle schools now use handheld electronic devices (e.g., tablets) for internet access for all students and for homework activities. EYL Internet resources will spread rapidly to primary schools and kindergartens for teachers, learners and parents (Zhou et al. 2010). For teachers, language and content information with lesson planning resources may be shared within and across institutions to give professional support for lesson planning and enhance socializing within a teaching community. For learners, resources may be organised thematically to accompany classroom learning, carefully related to a current national curriculum, and designed to encourage independent learning and to follow-up classwork at home. For parents, access to relevant websites can enable tracking children’s progress and obtaining additional guidance about ELL issues. Ideally, digital resources would be multisensory with colours, music and animation to aid memory and should be related to national or local contexts (Zhou et al. 2010).

Culture and classroom practices

While technology increasingly influences EYL in East Asia, there is evident continuity in cultural beliefs about how children learn and how teachers should teach. Such ‘cultures of learning’ (Cortazzi and Jin 1996b; Jin and Cortazzi 2006) mediate classroom pedagogies and may determine whether and precisely how innovations are enacted. Cultures of learning are not simply traditional practices but are contextualised by current social values and the local contexts of teachers’ experience in schools in large classes, often of 30–40 or more learners in primary school (Jin and Cortazzi 1998; Cortazzi and Jin 2001). Features of cultures associated with English-speaking countries or other cultures around the world are introduced orally or in textbooks at primary stages (e.g., introducing food or festivals; see Reilly and Ward 1997). In China this is within the now expected practice that appropriate aspects of Chinese cultures are also featured so that learners can talk about them in English to visitors. This is reflected in primary English textbooks but is underdeveloped towards intercultural understanding (see Driscoll and Simpson 2015) or intercultural communication. Hence, the English curriculum practices may be seen to maintain Chinese identity for learners, developing some knowledge of other cultures, but it does not yet seek to establish an intercultural identity.

In China, there are noticeable features of Chinese cultures of learning related to EYL classroom practices. These include a predominance of organised whole class activities. Activities are introduced, demonstrated, modelled and conducted by the teacher (or two teachers in kindergartens). Typically, activities include songs, verbal games and action routines (see Reilly and Ward 1997). Teachers make use of pictures and stories for labelling, simple retelling and perhaps for developing tasks (see Cameron 2001; Pinter 2015b). Some use role plays with greetings, simple enquiries and requests, shopping activities with simple realia or language routines with puppets. For learners aged 9–11 this can include textbook-based reading and writing activities such as reading aloud, copying words, matching and grouping flashcards and pictures, vocabulary games with objects, pictures or flashcards, use of picture books (see Mourão 2015) or brief presentations by learners after preparation and
practice. Such presentations may include descriptions of people, clothing, everyday activities or classroom objects. Wall posters may be actively used for short games and lexical sets, such as number and counting activities, days and months, and ‘word families’. Some classes use internet resources and electronic media, say, for animated stories or phonic activities with letters and short words (see Schmid and Whyte 2015, and this volume). Nevertheless, these are mainly organised as whole class events in a planned lesson structure which includes teacher-directed routines combining known and previously practised elements with new words or structures. This can be effective ‘learner-trained learning’ in disciplined, highly attentive and responsive classes (Jin and Cortazzi 1998). Some ELL teachers use pair activities to practice short dialogues, mainly carried out according to a textbook. Learners may read aloud and memorise a brief text.

Clearly, such activities can be effective. However, challenges remain: there are few voluntary individual or group activities and few creative extensions of activities or more spontaneous uses of English. While ‘learner-centred’ ideas are fairly current throughout East Asia there are still few developments towards more independent learning or ideas about meeting individual children’s needs for English (see Djigunovic and Lopriore 2011). There is, so far, little development towards ‘learning to learn’ (see Moon 2000; Cameron 2001; Pinter 2006). There is relatively little public knowledge or educational awareness of EYL special needs (except in specialist schools where progress is noticeable).

In Korea, a policy to ‘teach English in English’ may not help younger learners to understand. It seems to deny children’s L1 abilities and some difficulties might be overcome with some L1 use (Hayes 2014) or a translanguaging approach. While Chinese and Japanese EYL teachers are generally aware of communicative approaches and the need to emphasise the target language use, many are more flexible about L1 explanations or brief translations in classrooms.

**Literacy and oral skills**

Another contribution relates to reading, writing and spelling English. East Asian languages do not employ the Roman script used for English (though children will be exposed to English in the visual environment, e.g., in shops, advertisements and t-shirts). Therefore, the introduction of writing needs to be careful and gradual in relation to a first language script. In the case of ELL in China, kindergartens introduce the well-established pinyin system to children: this means that early literacy in Chinese is mediated by this Roman alphabet system as a transitional measure to assist learning Chinese characters. Pinyin is used throughout primary and later educational stages as a reference system for pronouncing Chinese characters, since the written characters themselves generally contain few clues for pronunciation. However, the relationship between pinyin and the far more complex system of phonics for English reading, writing and spelling is not straightforward. Understandably, some EYL teachers in China use ‘Western’ produced L1 materials to practice phonics. This has the advantage of providing systematic introduction and practice activities such as rhymes, songs and games, perhaps supported by interactive whiteboard and internet resources, but often the extensive vocabulary range and cultural examples in these is not suitable for East Asian contexts. Homework with reading and some writing may be given for ELL primary age groups, but this is likely more routine literacy practice and vocabulary learning; this is often supported at home by parents, who expect homework to be given.
English as a medium of instruction and bilingual schooling

In East Asia, with the current demand for English it is no surprise that there is strong interest in primary schools which use English as a medium of instruction (EMI) or in those international schools which develop content-based language learning and various forms of bilingual or immersion schooling. The shortage of appropriate teachers and relevant resources for EYL limits this. However, Hong Kong, with its own education system, has a tradition of bilingual kindergartens usually with trained EYL teachers and often highly proficient speakers. Yet local language policy shifts have reduced the number of EMI primary schools to a relatively few private institutions. In China, Taiwan and Korea English-only or bilingual kindergartens are popular among those parents who can afford them (Butler 2015). ‘English villages’ in Korea reportedly experienced financial difficulties (Jeon 2012); others seem viable in China. A 2001 Chinese law states that oral and written Chinese must be the medium of education except for recognised minority groups; apparently, early EMI can be seen as a threat to national identity (Feng and Adamson 2015). This apparently limits bilingual and EMI programmes to experimental contexts (e.g., in Xi’an, Shanghai, Wuhan and Beijing) or to international schools (for which many parents are willing to pay considerable fees). An EYL Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) programme in China, using English-medium instruction, is held as ‘Chinese-English bilingual education’ (Wei and Feng 2015).

A Taiwan study showed how learners in CLIL participated more in classroom interaction (Huang 2011). A Canada-USA-China collaboration programme developed partial-immersion principles in over 50 experimental schools in China, including at kindergarten and primary levels (Qiang et al. 2011). Teachers use multimedia-supported resources to emphasise listening; then speaking and engagement in classroom activities within curriculum themes. Success is reported not only for English but also for more interactive learning, without impeding the learning of Chinese or maths (Cheng et al. 2010). Similarly, a whole-school EMI approach studied in China (Liang et al. 2013) shows not only possibilities of greatly raising children’s English proficiency but demonstrates modifications of classroom interaction. In this case, 11-year-olds were observed to engage in peer assistance for English by giving each other repetitions, translations, explanations, clarifications, challenges and task-organization and emotional support (fostered over time by teachers). This is dramatically different from teacher-centred error correction in which teachers usually correct individuals directly or occasionally ask another learner to locate and repair an error. Thus, particular approaches or specific EYL contexts can modify cultures of learning. However, bilingual and other EYL programmes are problematic to compare: the former attracts learners from better educated and wealthier backgrounds, and quality learning is mediated by teachers’ English proficiency and professional development (Qiang et al. 2011).

Research: parental roles and children’s attitudes and motivation

Many East Asian parents consider their child’s academic performance a top priority. Increasingly, this includes ELL: proficiency in English is considered a mark of academic and social prestige. Such parents often believe in the motto ‘younger and higher’: children should start English early and can thus be expected to achieve higher proficiency (Zou and Zhang 2011). Related beliefs are that their children learn best under pressure and that the more time given to learning, the better. Hence many East Asian parents send their children in the evenings or on weekends to private chains of schools for individual English tuition.
or small group classes to supplement full-time schooling. A Shanghai study (Zhou et al. 2014) found 28% of children started ELL in kindergarten and another 31% started in after-kindergarten classes. Other young learners attend full-time private or international schools in which English plays a prominent role. Increasingly, brief visits to English speaking countries are part of this enthusiastic push towards ELL. Such parents are largely those of higher socioeconomic status (SES) in the rapidly expanding prosperity. Thus, SES seems to be a contextual factor in children’s access to ELL in both early stages before the official ELL starting point of primary Grade 3 and in later stages. However, this is complex: parents with high education background themselves help children learn better with social support (Zou and Zhang 2011). However, a survey of Chinese parents of learners in Grades 4, 6 and 8 (Butler 2013) examined the socioeconomic status (SES) of parents in a medium-sized city and found that SES was not related to any differences in parents’ beliefs about English or the perceived value of ELL. Nevertheless, this study found large differences by Grade 4 regarding how parents helped their children to learn English, which affected the learners’ speaking performance.

An extensive online survey of Chinese parents (China Daily 2013) found apparently contradictory attitudes. Although 86% of the children had had English classes starting in kindergarten or lower primary grades (47% between ages 3 and 6, and 16% from the age of three), only 10% of their children were ‘really interested’ in English and a majority of the parents knew their children did not like learning the language. Parents nevertheless wanted their children to learn English in the strong belief that this would increase their children’s chances to enter a better middle school and thence university for a better future. Other research (cited in Li 2018, p. 38) claims that 87% of Chinese parents are in favour of children studying English before the age of five and that 63% would send their children to English classes at training institutions.

In contrast, a kindergarten study in China using both quantitative and qualitative methods (Jin et al. 2016) reported how nearly 50% of this age group spent up to 30 minutes a day learning English, largely through songs and watching cartoons. Most children said they liked learning English: it was ‘good’, ‘fun’ and many ‘loved it’ and were happy and engaged, though some found it ‘hard’ and anticipated it would get harder in later stages. A few expressed negative attitudes of ‘unhappiness’ or ‘loathing’: apparently, they disliked ‘reciting and memorizing English words’. Significantly, many children were influenced by parental attitudes and whether their parents were themselves involved with English and supported children by obtaining materials. Graduated parents were more likely to show explicit support, while those few who were against an early start wanted their children to learn Chinese well before starting English.

Studies in Japan show how learners’ willingness to communicate in English declines in later primary stages (Nishida 2012), which aligns with the general finding of loss of interest in later primary grades (Carreira 2011; Butler 2015), but this is complex and is affected by attitudes towards learning (Adachi 2011, 2012) and learners’ perceptions of ‘classroom atmosphere’ (Nishida and Yashima 2009). In China, a study of primary Grade 1 and 3 children (Jin et al. 2014b) found children agreed that learning English is ‘interesting’, ‘useful’ and ‘helpful for the future’; they considered it ‘important in the world’ and thought that it made them ‘knowledgeable’. Through eliciting metaphors for learning, the study revealed that 56% of these learners had positive attitudes while only 8% had negative attitudes about English; others were neutral or ambivalent. For Grade 3 children, motivation to learn was more dynamic: they were more willing to talk to ‘foreigners’, had a stronger desire to gain competence and were more aware of the role of English in the curriculum. While many parents
had modest or limited attainments in English themselves, their great financial and time investment for their children in EYL is striking evidence of their support. Parents’ and children’s expectations, attitudes and practices towards English seem intertwined and mutually influential on learners’ progress.

**Recommendations for practice**

East Asian practices for EYL can be greatly enhanced by teacher development for experienced staff and training for those with little or no specialist training. This key recommendation could focus on both broad issues of language, child development and education, and on extending, developing and innovating within classroom practices, yet to consolidate identifiable progress which has clearly been made. This should include developing and validating uses of digital technologies, developing both literacy and oral communication skills and developing the roles of parents and their understanding of language learning and use. Given how EYL is a foundation for later learning, for English but also for children’s general educational, personal, social and cultural development, more resources should be allocated to this area, especially for materials and methods which engage learners in active participation, develop critical and creative thinking, and sustain their interest and motivation. Further recommendations relate to digital technologies and research.

**Researching EYL**

EYL in East Asia, despite huge interest and the millions of learners involved at ever younger ages, remains one of the least researched areas in ELT. Of course, research methods with children need careful consideration for feasibility, appropriateness, ethics and validity (see Pinter, this volume). Using established questionnaire surveys may be appropriate for investigations with teachers, and such methods fit an East Asian perception that in research measurements are expected. Current topics which need research include EYL teachers’ and learners’ beliefs, values and practices and those of children’s parents and carers; home-school links regarding EYL; teachers’ training, pedagogic and professional career development; the roles and effectiveness of training centres, summer programmes and extracurricular activities; the range, uses and value of different classroom activities, textbooks and digital materials; and the functions and effects of English through drama, stories, art, sciences, singing and music, and how these relate to developments towards holistic learning (development of ‘the whole child’). Longitudinal studies to evaluate the effectiveness of EYL on later language learning (Liu 2007), communication and attitudes towards peoples and cultures, and on subsequent educational achievement, are needed. Research to investigate parental beliefs about how English relates to school achievement and ‘dreams’ for their children’s futures would have educational and social significance. Research into the effectiveness of digital affordances will be useful, not only to track how devices and digital resources are used but also on how they affect classroom interaction and progress in learning and to ascertain the value they add to ELL.

Further research methods exploring children’s self-evaluations and informed classroom observations (either systematically using checklists quantitatively or more qualitative field studies and ethnographies) are needed (Pinter 2006, 2011, 2015a). Innovative methods using narrative and metaphor analysis are worth exploring right through this age group because they engage children’s interest and creativity and are shown to yield fascinating insights (Jin et al. 2014a, 2014b, 2016). Such methods use pictures, coloured cards, toys and objects to help
elicit stories and metaphors in a play context. These methods, alongside interviews, show young learners’ dynamic thinking about their English learning experiences. They bring insights into children’s experiences, attitudes and feelings, even with primary learners with special needs, such as Singaporean children with dyslexia (Jin et al. 2011). These methods potentially give an insider perspective through children’s eyes and minds, complementing quantitative research. Such perspectives should include how children and teachers see multilingual skills and their identity development (Lo Bianco et al. 2009).

**Future directions**

Even with extensive developments and innovations in East Asia, traditional practices and pedagogies remain influential within cultures of learning. This may be expected, given the diversity of contexts (geographically, economically, linguistically and culturally). Parents are important stakeholders in EYL: their views and attitudes need to be known by teachers to support parental roles and foster home-school links for English. Key challenges include specific EYL teacher training and pedagogic development, the improvement of methods and availability of better resources, and perhaps the wider education of parents about English and foreign or second language learning. These factors limit – or can enhance – EYL. Increased use of digital technologies for ELL in this region seem inevitable; this might assist teachers to meet some identified challenges but this would depend on the quality of software provision and the actual value of use both in and outside classrooms. The social valuation given to early years’ education in this region now often includes the element of EYL and this will be enhanced with progressive internationalization. If challenges can be met competently, with research-based developments, imagination and enthusiasm, the EYL future in the region is bright.

**Further reading**

   
   This study focused on the use of two storytelling methods, Character Imagery (CI) and Simple Reading (SR), to 10–12-year-old Japanese primary school learners of English. It was found that the CI method had achieved a greater effect on the vocabulary and comprehension of English.

   
   This is an experimental study of the learnability of Korean young learners receiving the teaching of English pronunciation through a high variability phonetic training (HVPT) program. This study indicates a greater benefit of using HVPT to these young learners, particularly if they are highly motivated.

**Related topics**

Motivation, listening and speaking, assessment, research issues with young learners

**References**


Garton, Sue, Copland, Fiona and Burns, Anne (2011). Investigating global practices in teaching English to young learners. *ELT Research Papers* 11–01


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